

The impact of the new technologies on the administrative professionalism

The purpose of the research is to outline the evolution of the administrative professionalism in the light of the impact deriving from the introduction of the new technologies, in order to understand how companies can orientate themselves among emerging professional profiles, requested competences and necessary training routes.

The bibliographical analysis starts from identifying the professional figures that have traditionally characterized the Administration, Control and Finance function, then focuses on studying the problems linked to the evaluation of the ICT impact on companies, and ends with the analysis of the consequences for the administrative professionalism system deriving from the introduction of the new technologies.

It is notable how the *information technology* evolution has allowed a considerable improvement of the efficiency and effectiveness in the management of all those structured processes such as the operating control; as a matter of fact, those activities lend themselves to be delegated to the systems. From a working organization viewpoint, the technology spreading modifies all the activities traditionally carried out, which sometimes turns also into structural modifications of the involved activities and responsibilities. This change is faced with some awe by companies because of the potential reduction in the number of employees and the loss of qualification due to the automation process.

If, on the one hand the ICT spreading has certainly led to the re-organization of its activities, it also gave rise to some re-consideration of the role carried out by the function and a modification of the skills belonging to the function operators. In fact, a new administrative professionalism is born which must be able to collaborate actively with the other organizational units and the top management, and support as a partner the decision-making process given that it will be more and more directly involved in the strategic planning process. It will keep managing the costing, budgeting, reporting and performance management processes, contributing to the definition of the performances indicators, yet focusing its own analyses on “what counts”. Finally, it will re-design its own processes in order to optimize the efficiency and effectiveness, and it will play a leading role in the configuration choices of the information systems. In short, the profile of the new administrative employee develops according to a consulting profile.

Consequently, the new technologies concerning information and communication would replace the administration professionals in the more routinary activities, this way freeing some resources for the carrying out of activities with a higher added value, contributing to a re-qualification of the administrative staff. In particular, the specialistic competences remain a cultural background which is essential for the administration, yet at the same time the so-called managerial skills (leadership, analysis capacities, etc.) and the knowledge of the business acquire more and more importance.

Starting from the considerations developed by the literature analysis, the research group wanted to verify on the spot, through the analysis of a series of company experiences, how the introduction of the information and communication technologies modified the administrative professionalism system.

The adopted research method envisaged the carrying out of a series of in depth *semi-structured* interviews addressed to the administrative function managers. The research has been realized on a sample of nine companies, chosen among big and small sized realities operating in different

economic fields. In order to identify the state-of-the-art and evolutionary trends of the administrative professionalism, a questionnaire has been prepared which aimed at highlight the ICT effects on four different investigation areas: the role, the processes, the instruments and the competences.

The main results of the research on the field are consistent with what emerged from the literature, the Administration, Control and Finance function has taken on a significant role in the value generation processes. Such role made the function get closer to the strategical aspects of the business.

Nowadays, it carries out three essential roles:

- an institutional communication role towards the stakeholders;
- a concrete supporting role for the business units and the top management in the planning, programming and control of the management;
- a leadership role within the framework of the information processes.

From the organizational viewpoint, two important aspects must be noted. On the one hand, the progressive getting closer of the Administration, Control and Finance function to the business units and the top management, on the other hand a different combination of the sub-functions in which the structure is typically articulated. The most important are: the administration strictly speaking, the finance and management control. In particularly complex organizations, also the purchases, general services, immovable property management and information systems fall within the control of the Administration, Control and Finance.

The direct analysis comes next, with the identification of the main processes presided over by the Administration, Control and Finance function, and of the effect the ICT introduction brought about. For the activities carried out by the administration sub-function strictly speaking and the Finance sub-function, it turned out to be a wider effect compared to the activities carried out by the management control.

As regards the information technology level, all the different companies rank in an advanced stage: 70% of them operate according to an ERP logic and the remaining 30% intends to integrate their own systems in the next two years. The main reason why they decided to implement advanced information technology systems is the search for a higher efficiency in the use of the available resources and a higher efficiency in the achievement of the objective of increasing their customers' satisfaction. On the contrary, dissatisfaction derives from long term implementation of the new technologies and their rigidity in complying with every company's specificity.

In conclusion, what emerges is that the ICT introduction has enabled, in the interviewed companies, deep transformations in the administrative professionalism. The *skill set* of the Administration, Control and Finance function operators has widened, the competence and knowledge that seemed to characterize the administrative profile until a few years ago now seem to belong to a species on the verge of extinction.

The administrative employee's task is becoming a difficult job for which it is necessary to have complete professional competences. The technical-specialistic competences of the function remain an essential condition for the operators in the Administration, Control and Finance area, yet two new competences now fall within the administrative profile:

- the information technology competences;
- the managerial competences.

The administrative employee must not simply know how to use the IT tools in a repetitive and aseptic way (*generic user*), he must also know how to master technologies and fully exploit their potentiality (*power user*).

The managerial competences are not related to the specific function activity, they are of a generic nature, intended to support the *governance* and especially the management activities: the leadership ability, the relationship capacity, the analytical capacities, the data interpretation ability, the knowledge of the models for the decision-making process, the business knowledge and the knowledge of the organizational implications deriving from the introduction of the information systems.

The *Information & Communication Technology* has caused the administrative staff to face a crucial choice: either change or disappear. If they want to survive, the administrative staff will have to start an evolution leading them to a better professional qualification and a constant responsabilization. The advice many authors give to boring book-keepers is to change from *number crunchers* to *business partners*. Actually, it is translated into the necessity for the administrative staff to go past the borders of their traditional role of keepers of the financial-economic knowledge, in order to open to the business needs. Yet, to that end the administrative staff will have to provide themselves with a profile of competences which is wider than the present one. They will need sound information knowledge and managerial capacities that up to now could not be part of their cultural background.

The administrative staff have proven to be pro-active with regard to the change. In 2000, the administrative employee masters technologies, not only he knows how to use them, actually he is the one who decides their architecture and encourages the other operators to use them. Thanks to this knowledge he works more and more closely to both the organizational units and the top management, providing a real support to the operating decisions and the strategy design. The evolution the administrative professionalism has accomplished has been a slow process which started late and has not finished yet.

Also in the interviewed companies it is possible to spot distinct stages of the administrative professionalism evolution. In some realities the sought-after term of *business partners* has been achieved, in other realities it is being achieved. Nevertheless, there are two trends which are shared by all companies and guarantee a real determination to change: the stated awareness that the change is necessary and the disappearance of the traditional administrative employee who is sitting inside his office and busy “calculating” figures.